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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of a self help book on assertiveness training was assessed by comparing two bibliotherapy conditions with group therapy and a waiting list control condition. One group of bibliotherapy subjects read a popular paperback with no therapist contact, while the other group additionally participated in informal discussion sessions. Assessment instruments included self report measures of assertiveness and anxiety, as well as verbal role play responses to taped analogue situations. A small sample size and large dropout rate precluded definitive conclusions, but results indicated that both bibliotherapy procedures were essentially as effective as assertiveness trainnig group therapy. A near-significant decrease in anxiety was observed in subjects who became more assertive. (Author)

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BEHAVIORAL BIBLIOTHERAPY:

An Evaluation of a Self Help Book

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I first became interested in this area after noticing the astounding proliferation of self help books that are currently available in any bookstore. As psychologists, I'm sure that you all have spent some time wandering through the many popular self help books, and are aware of the diversity of problems which can be supposedly cured by reading a short paperback. There are books on quitting smoking, achieving instant self-actualization, becoming more assertive, and even learning how to get out of the pits since life is a bowl of cherries and we are all our own best friends anyway. The question that intrigued me is whether anybody had ever attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of these types of books. That is, from a consumerism and empirical standpoint, does the reading of a self help book actually lead to any measureable change?

Surprisingly, I found little research on this question. The closest relevant studies focused on evaluating self help manuals developed by therapists for use as adjuncts to standard individual or group therapy programs. Balch and Ross (1974) evaluated a book on obesity, Stuart and Davis' Slim Chance in a Fat World (1972), and found significant weight loss in subjects who read the book under therapist supervision. Gambrill (1975) found that women who read her social skills manual initiated more social contacts than controls. On the other hand, Monti and his co-workers and Providence VA have recently found that with psychiatric patients, the reading of a social skills manual is relatively unsuccessful in producing significant improvement. However, the more interesting question of looking at a bestseller under conditions that simulate the real world situation of the anxious person buying a book to help him/her self remains uninvestigated.

One reason for this is that, like in psychotherapy outcome studies, there is an extraordinary methodological difficulty in selecting appropriate relevant

measures for evaluating self help books. For example, just how can we know if a person has become more self-actualized? As a result, I had to modify my original idea somewhat and decided to evaluate a bestseller on the subject of assertiveness, mainly because well validated and useful measures of assertive behavior have been developed. I chose to use the College Self Expression Scale (CSES) (Galassi, Galassi, DeLo and Bastien, 1973), a fifty item paper and pencil questionnaire, as well as the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (Speilberger, Gorsuch and Lushene, 1970). As a behavioral measure the subjects listened to a tape that asked them to respond to a series of roleplays that call for assertive responses. These taped situations were adapted from the work of McFall and his associates. I chose When I Say No I Feel Guilty by Smith as the book to evaluate since it is both a popular bestseller and presents straightforward techniques for becoming more assertive.

A four group design was used. One group, the Self Help Book group, read When I Say No I Feel Guilty under no supervision; a second group read the book and met once a week for an hour of informal discussion led by a nondirective undergraduate. This second group was conceptualized as a control procedure for the attention and time given the third group, which went through an Assertiveness Training course led by a counselor at the University Counseling Center. Additionally, a standard waiting list control condition was employed.

An attempt was made to secure highly sub-assertive subjects. The CSES questionnaire was distributed to about 1200 undergrads and only those who scored less than one standard deviation below the mean were contacted and asked to participate. Initially we had hoped to get 60 subjects but only 43 were interested enough to come in for pretest assessment.

Unfortunately, as is so often the case with these type of studies, only 17 subjects completed treatment - fifteen females and two males. We were obviously

disappointed at the high dropout rate but decided that the data were worth analyzing with the rationale that conclusions would have to be tentative and could only be generalizable to persons who are truly interested in helping themselves. As a first step, scores of dropouts were compared with successful subjects on the CSES and it was found that dropouts were significantly more assertive, although still, remember, quite below average. Also, dropouts did not initially rate their opinion of the program any lower than subjects who remained. The breakdown of the 17 subjects was 5 in the Assertiveness Training group, 5 in the Self Help Book plus Discussion group, 4 in the Self Help Book group and 3 in the control condition. Non parametric statistics were employed. On the questionnaire measure of assertiveness all three groups improved dramatically and significantly, going from about two standard deviations below the mean at pretest to the mean at a posttest six weeks later. The controls showed minor changes, with one S actually getting worse. While these pre-post changes were significant because of the small sample, the between groups comparison with the control group was not significant. That there was no difference between experimental groups is obviously the most important finding. A similar pattern emerged on the taped anxiety measures. As far as the taped situation was concerned, taped responses were scored for duration as well as for an overall rating of how assertive the subject sounded to a trained rater, who was blind to the study. All three experimental groups improved pre-post either significantly or at levels that just failed to reach significance. On the duration measure the Assertiveness Training group was clearly the best procedure but on the global assertiveness rating there was no difference between experimental conditions, although the Assertiveness Group did slightly better. On the anxiety measure, a curious thing happened that is most likely an artifact of this study. Self Help book and

Assertiveness subjects became significantly less anxious but Self Help Book plus Discussion and control subjects stayed the same. However, the two groups that decreased began at more anxious levels and ended up at anxiety levels that were the same as for the two groups that did not show any change. Personally I was quite pleased by the fact that any subject showed demonstrable decrease in anxiety since the Trait scale of the State Trait Anxiety Inventory is a very stable measure that is said to reflect major changes in an individual. Lastly, correlations between the various measures were computed. It was found that with one exception, the measures correlated quite poorly with each other. I am still not quite sure how to interpret this result. I was hoping that the behavioral measure and the questionnaire would be measuring similar dimensions of assertiveness; apparently this is not the case. Only the STAI and the CSES showed any relationship - a negative correlation that just failed to be significant. I tend to interpret this result as evidence that not only are highly subassertive subjects deficit in certain appropriate social behaviors, they also tend to be quite anxious as well. Furthermore, teaching them skills to cope with their environment better reduces their levels of anxiety.

In summary, I would like to say that initially I was relatively certain that the Assertiveness Training subjects would do much better, but this was not the case. It appears that reading a good book about Assertiveness Training is as helpful in producing behavior change as participating in a group led by an experienced leader. On the other hand, the high dropout rate and small n rule out strong conclusions, but, as a pilot study, the results are certainly fascinating. Should they hold up with more research, it will raise serious doubts about the assumed superiority of group therapy as well as demonstrate the effect

of one particular book in helping people, or at least those with specific problems in assertiveness and self-confidence . In closing, I would like to encourage more research in evaluating other popular self help books, especially those of the "instant self-actualization" genre.

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